

in the Three Chapters dispute was not the protection of local practice, but rather an absolute deference to the authority of the Council of Chalcedon; if anything, the bishops of the African church were motivated by their concern to be active members of a universal church.

Ch. 5 'The Moorish Alternative' is a difficult outlier, but the territory is navigated with confidence. Once proud and unambiguous *Romani*, many of the inhabitants of the Mauretanian provinces, Numidia and inland Tripolitania found themselves viewed with disdain as barbaric *Mauri* by the time of the Byzantine conquest. But if the *Mauri* of Corippus and Procopius do frequently sound like barbarians, they acted in ways that would not have been completely alien to the aristocrats of Carthage. Spectacular as the Djedar tumuli near Tiaret may seem, they were adorned with Latin inscriptions. Other well-known inscriptions, such as those of Masgiven at Altava and Masties in the Aurès mountains, also reveal a firm desire to articulate authority in a familiar 'Roman' mode. In part, of course, this is simply a reflection of the nature of our sources, and forms of identity display (and political organization) which were not inscribed in Latin on prominent stones are invisible to us. But what survives remains important. C. provides a tremendously helpful summary of this material, and a series of important observations about its interpretation.

In many ways, the specific title of C.'s book belies its true value. While important observations are certainly offered here about the changing nature of 'Roman' (and other) identities in Late Antiquity, these are based upon exceptionally firm foundations. As a starting point for Vandal and Moorish history in this period — still better as a thorough overview of the *status quaestionis* on the murky world of Byzantine Africa — C.'s book is to be warmly recommended.

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doi:10.1017/S0075435814000975

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L. DOSSEY, *PEASANT AND EMPIRE IN CHRISTIAN NORTH AFRICA* (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 47). Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. Pp. xix + 376, illus. ISBN 9780520254398. £47.95.

C. GREY, *CONSTRUCTING COMMUNITIES IN THE LATE ROMAN COUNTRYSIDE*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. 284. ISBN 9781107011625. £66.00.

In the fourth century, the countryside of Numidia was a dangerous place. According to Optatus, the Bishop of Milev (Mila in north-eastern Algeria), property-owners regularly were attacked by peasant terrorists: 'No one was permitted to be secure on their estates; the signatures of debtors lost their value; no creditor at that time had freedom to exact payment; all were terrified by those who claimed that they were the generals of the saints' (*Contra Parmenianum Donatistam* 3.4, ed. C. Ziwsa, CSEL 26). Modern scholars have rightly pointed to the rhetorical nature of such denunciations of rural rebellion. By fashioning their opponents as social revolutionaries, men such as Optatus hoped to convince imperial officials to intervene in local conflicts. And yet, as Leslie Dossey points out in her outstanding history of the North African peasantry, in earlier centuries such accusations had not formed part of the rhetorical armoury of petitioners seeking imperial support. Why did the rural population in Late Antiquity suddenly become the object of élite anxiety? Against conventional views that the standing of the rural population deteriorated in Late Antiquity, D. provocatively argues the fourth and fifth centuries witnessed an unprecedented reassertion of peasant power. Her book triangulates the socio-cultural shape of the North African peasantry from three angles: economic, political and ideological.

Part One deals with the economy. Combining a highly innovative reinterpretation of ceramic distributions with revealing side-glances of the literary and visual evidence, D. makes a compelling case that, in Late Antiquity, North African peasants became not poorer, but wealthier than before. In the first three centuries A.D., Roman élites deliberately designed fiscal systems and commodity markets in such ways as to exclude peasants from access to cities and the consumer goods sold there. By contrast, the fourth and fifth centuries witnessed what D. aptly calls a 'late-antique consumer revolution' (62). For the first time, high-quality ceramics, glass and other consumer goods penetrated the North African countryside. Even that ultimate symbol of urban lifestyle — the bathhouse — was now widely found in North African villages. The shabbily dressed and unwashed peasant of the early Empire had transformed into a sophisticated and self-assured rural consumer.

Part Two turns from the economy to rural politics. Against Rostovtzeff's view of the Principate as the golden age of village self-government, D. demonstrates that the distinctive style of city-based imperialism pursued by the Roman imperial government entailed the destruction of rural political collectives. Previously autonomous villages were disbanded, their lands distributed to neighbouring cities and estate-owners. In Late Antiquity, emperors continued to exclude the inhabitants of the North African countryside from political representation. Yet the institutions of the Christian Church offered peasants new opportunities to make their voices heard. On the initiative of the inhabitants of rural estates and villages, hundreds of new episcopal sees were established. By electing bishops as their representatives, peasants obtained a public voice and a communal identity — 'without any emperor ever authorizing them to do so' (141).

Part Three traces the impact of Christian cultural practices on the self-understandings of peasants. Through an analysis of dozens of anonymous sermons surviving from late antique North Africa, D. shows (*contra* Ramsay MacMullen) that the audience of Christian preachers was not exclusively urban, but encompassed large sections of the rural population. The exposure to the technology of literacy and to biblical ideas of justice provided peasants with new languages in which resistance against long-standing practices of exploitation such as food speculation, usury and debt slavery could be articulated. Like the widening of access to consumer goods and the increase in the number of rural bishoprics, so also the arrival in the countryside of literate religious specialists contributed to the dissolution of the firm boundary which had previously separated the rural population from their urban superiors.

D.'s study, which focuses specifically on North Africa, is usefully supplemented by Cam Grey's excellent monograph, which surveys the history of the peasantry across the entire expanse of the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries. G.'s book is divided into seven chapters. Ch. 1 offers a *tour-de-force* through competing theories of the 'peasant' and explores the family and community structures in which different groups of agricultural workers operated; ch. 2 argues that economic survival and the maintenance of community cohesion were the primary determinants of peasant behaviour; ch. 3 looks at the strategies employed by rural communities to maintain their internal unity; chs 4 and 5 explore their relationships to external patrons; chs 6 and 7 traces the impact on the inhabitants of the Roman countryside of the introduction of a new fiscal system by the Tetrarchs.

G.'s argument is primarily based on close readings of literary sources: saints' lives, aristocratic letter-collections, classical histories and imperial legislation. G. frankly acknowledges that the authors of these texts are untrustworthy guides to rural realities in the late Roman world: 'The picture they provide of the motivations and objectives of the inhabitants of the countryside of the late Roman world is at best partial and imperfect' (10). But for G., this is no reason to throw up our hands in despair. Comparative evidence provides a method to peer through the thick mists of ideological obfuscation. By looking at patterns of peasant behaviour in other places and periods, G. is able to construct what he calls 'constellations of the possible' (23–4) — plausible scenarios of the realities which stood behind the narratives told by élite authors. G. deploys this method with great skill. He is helped by the fact that he is not only widely read in peasant theory, but also an exemplarily subtle reader of ancient texts. There are many highlights in this book, amongst them important observations on the differences in the structure of rural communities in the eastern and western Mediterranean (92–8), on the rôle played by religious festivals in the negotiation of intravillage conflict (105–11), and on the propensity of late antique authors to interpret even the most random interactions with peasants through a power-political prism (172–7).

But it is probably the final two chapters (on the impact of the Tetrarchic fiscal reforms) which show G.'s method at its most effective. By situating imperial legislation in the wider contexts of peasant life, he significantly deepens our understanding of these texts. Three conclusions seem to me particularly noteworthy. Firstly, G. observes that the tendency of imperial legislators to interpret any conflict in fiscal terms must not be allowed to obscure the fact that the real issues at stake were often much more mundane. For example, legislators tended to see all forms of rural mobility as deliberate tax evasion, whereas the comparative evidence clearly shows that agricultural labourers normally abandoned their lands because of seasonal crop rotation schemes (169–72). Secondly, the obsession of imperial administrators with fiscality could be exploited by peasants. As G. shows through clever readings of various papyri, by denouncing their neighbours as tax-dodgers, Egyptian villagers attempted to involve the imperial administration in local disputes (216–25). Thirdly, and most provocatively, G. suggests that the registration on the tax-rolls of their landlords made it easier for tenants to force their superiors to honour their

contractual obligations. In this sense, the new system of taxation may not have weakened, but strengthened the bargaining power of peasants *vis-à-vis* their superiors: 'mutual responsibility for taxation is likely to have created an incentive for all parties to involve themselves to some degree in reciprocal relationships' (203–6 and 213–16, quoted at 216). Although G. employs different forms of evidence and a different methodology, he reaches remarkably similar conclusions to D. Peasants appear not as hapless victims of historical change, but as independent actors who were able to manipulate the institutions of the Roman state to their own benefit.

These books are important. By highlighting the opportunities provided for the inhabitants of the countryside by the fiscal, political and religious transformations of the fourth century, D. and G. offer a powerful challenge to traditional views of the late antique peasantry as a class on a slippery slope to serfdom. Of course, not all aspects of their interpretation will find universal assent. In particular, the question remains open of where exactly on the social ladder D.'s and G.'s peasants should be situated. The self-assertive rural consumers whose rise is traced in D.'s work surely encompassed only a small minority of the inhabitants of the late Roman countryside. And of course, villagers who had the legal knowledge and political connections to navigate the intricacies of the Roman taxation system with such skill as G. envisages constituted an even tinier proportion of the rural population. It is not clear whether the opportunities enjoyed by these 'super-peasants' did much to improve the overall situation of the inhabitants of the late antique countryside. On the contrary, it is possible that the price paid for the success of a small group of wealthy agriculturalists was intensified exploitation of their less well-off peers. On this reading, the spread of luxury goods in the countryside might be read not as a symptom of a general upsurge in prosperity, but as the product of greater inequality *between* different groups of agricultural workers.

One contributing factor to such inequality has recently been highlighted by Kyle Harper. His *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275–425* (2011) makes a powerful argument that slavery was ubiquitous in the late Roman Mediterranean. Interestingly, in one of the new letters of Augustine (brilliantly discussed by D. on pp. 190–1 for the light shed by them on the use made by inhabitants of the North African countryside of the normative discourse of imperial law), the bishop's rural clients complain about the reduction of tenants to servile status and the sale of their children as slaves. Such evidence might suggest that the aggressive self-assertiveness displayed by late Roman peasants was not only motivated by the new opportunities to which some of them obtained access in Late Antiquity. It also may have been a response to the constant risk of a degradation of their status. In this sense, the evidence assembled by D. and G. may not be as incompatible with conventional views of an overall decline in the standing of the rural population as it may appear at first sight. But such hesitations should not be allowed to obscure the remarkable achievement of these two books. By assembling and reinterpreting a host of previously neglected sources on the late Roman countryside, they have given us something which so far had been the preserve of historians of other periods and places: a 'total' history of a pre-modern peasantry.

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doi:10.1017/S0075435814000987

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A. FEAR, J. FERNÁNDEZ UBIÑA and M. MARCOS (EDS), *THE ROLE OF THE BISHOP IN LATE ANTIQUITY: CONFLICT AND COMPROMISE*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Pp. x + 270. ISBN 9781780932170. £70.00.

Recent scholarship has done much to illuminate the transformation of the rôle and status of the late antique bishop. The present edited volume, which emerged from an international conference held in Granada in autumn 2011, provides a further contribution to this ever-expanding field. The essays presented do not quite do justice to the breadth promised by the volume's title, for there is a strong western bias and many of the papers return to well-trodden ground. Nevertheless, there is much here of value for students and scholars alike, particularly through the Spanish influence that permeates the collection. The entire volume testifies once more to the diverse currents that shaped episcopal power during Late Antiquity: from ecclesiastical controversies and asceticism to the rise of papal authority and the Germanic kingdoms of the post-Roman West.

The world of Late Antiquity offers many opportunities to explore the inter-related themes of conflict and compromise, making the choice of case studies inevitably selective. Gregory of